

'Suddenly the Celtic Tiger died and it didn't make sense. Where I'd been, the kids don't have clean water...

Elaine Bannon had life lived. She had a high-flying career in the lighting industry; a house and a flash car. She took two holidays a year and enjoyed countless weekends away. But in 2002, Elaine took stock. "I celebrated my 40th birthday with a friend in Kenya. It was a typical package; we went on Safari for a week and then spent a week on a beach relaxing. But when I got back, I couldn't settle down.

"Everyone seemed to want more. The suppliers wanted more money; my employer wanted more profit, and the customers wanted more discount. Suddenly the Celtic Tiger ideal didn't make sense to me.

"Where I had been, people didn't even have clean water. I'd seen poverty. I'd seen kids who hadn't shoes or a school to go to.

"I handed in my notice in 2003. Our courier on that holiday had told me about her friend who ran a free school in Mombassa. I asked if she wanted a volunteer, and went to see her.

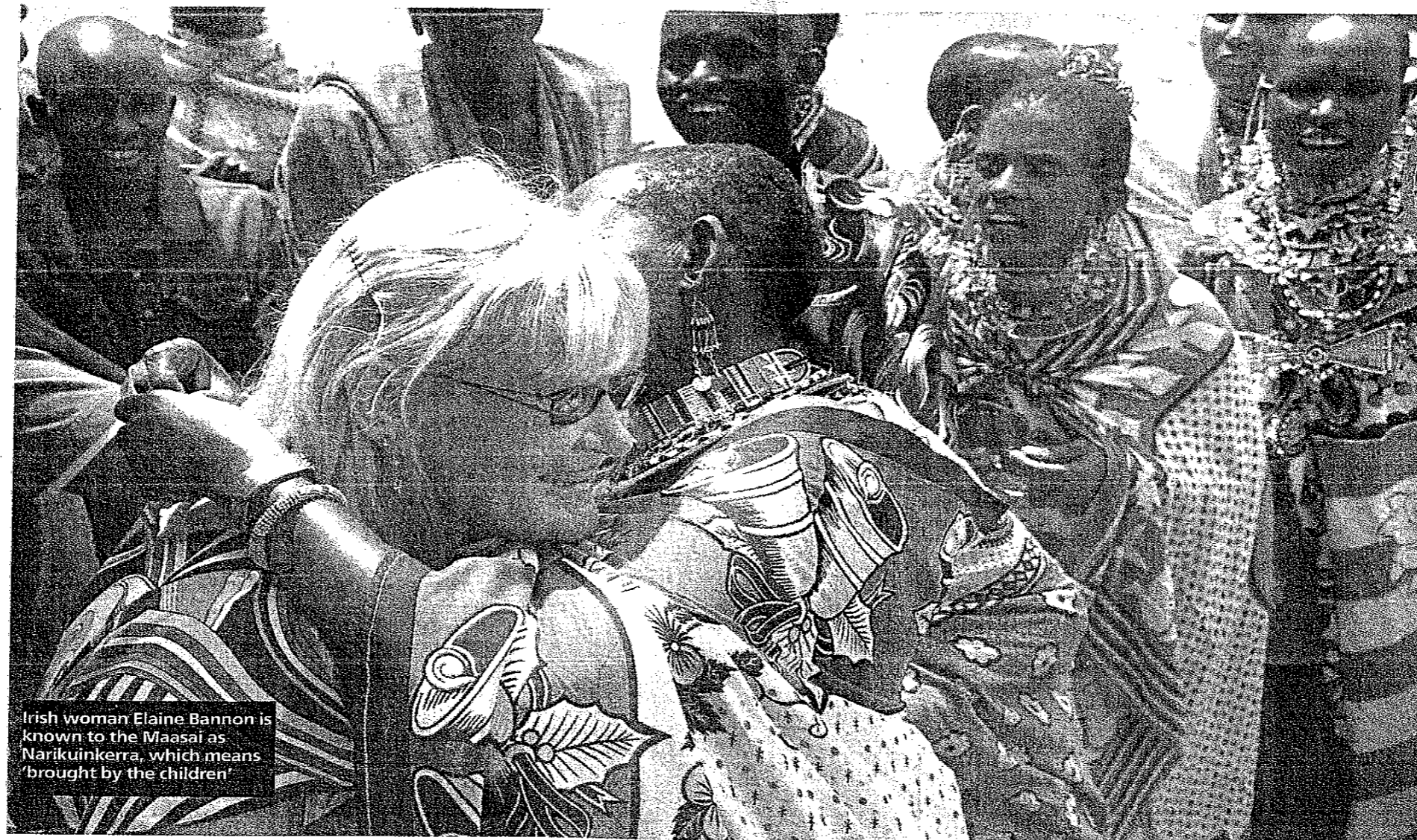
"Then I returned to Ireland and wrote to some customers asking could they give me money to help the school and I raised around €15,000. I went to help in the school for a year and I put the cash to good use. I did everything. We had a clinic. Some days I would run that cleaning up wounds and treating malaria; other days I would teach; help cook lunch or sweep the floor.

"I met some Maasai people who became friends. They invited me to visit their homes in Rombo - the most Southern part of the Kenyan Rift Valley where the Maasai tribe live. They live in huts made from mud and cow dung; and, mainly, still live through their animals: cows, sheep and goats.

It was like going back to the dark ages. There were no roads, just dirt tracks, and there was little access to education. The only source of water was the river or the spring. They are peaceful people, and hospitable. I fell in love with the area, but I became aware of their profound difficulties. I wanted to help.

"I talked to local leaders, like a Roman Catholic priest and a Pentecostal Bishop. One of the Maasai guys had worked for a charity that had run out of money.

"I went back to Ireland after the year, and thought about the Maasai. And I decided to go back there and live. I've been there ever since. I have formed a community - a precursor to an NGO - called Light of Maasai. My aim is to help the people with education, with health,



Irish woman Elaine Bannon is known to the Maasai as Narikuinkerra, which means 'brought by the children'

Elaine Bannon gave up a life of luxury in Ireland to live in poverty while helping the Maasai people of Kenya. **Sue Leonard** hears her remarkable story

and with water projects. Three young Maasai men from the area help me. They translate, and point me in the right direction.

"I live in a little house provided by a mission. It has a sheet iron roof, a bathroom, and, most

of the time, running water. It's basic, but comfortable. I raise money in Ireland. Matt Porter of The Kedington Group, and, through him, the Rotary club, have been amazing. And I do one project at a time.

"One month I might dig a

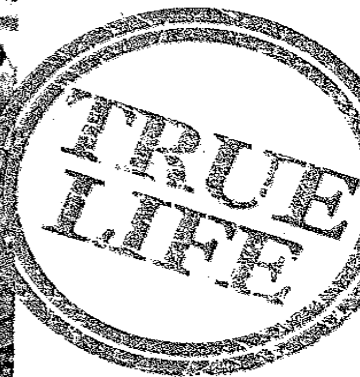
well. The next I'll build a classroom. That might take five or six months. The work makes a huge difference. The people love me. They call me Narikuinkerra, or Nariku for short. It means 'brought by the children'.

"AIDS is a problem here, but

children die of diarrhoea too. We've had a drought. Cows aren't producing milk and there's no money for food. You can plough an acre, with your bare hands; you can plant it and fertilise it, but if it doesn't rain for a year the crop dies in the

ground. Every morning when I wake up I will find at least two women in my garden, waiting to see me. Perhaps they are starving and need a bag of rice. Maybe their baby has malaria or typhoid and they don't have the money to pay for the medicine.

"We've just opened school. Three classrooms were built for us, and two by AMREF - the African Medical Research Foundation. The women told me that their children had to walk 12km to the nearest school. They might meet wild animals



"Perhaps her husband wanted to take her daughter out of school; to circumcise her and marry her off. She wants help to stop that. In that case we try to get the girl into boarding school away from the village. We may involve a local chief, or, in the last resort, the police.

"Female circumcision is against the law in Kenya, but unless the family is educated, Maasai girls are circumcised.

"When they ask me to sponsor a child I first have to make sure the story is legitimate. If it is, I say, 'you will have to wait a month or a year. I will do my best to get you money'.